



# Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan

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*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Pakistan faces difficult challenges in shaping policy toward Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Though Pakistan continues to back its Afghan ally, the Taliban's military takeover and subsequent diplomatic and economic isolation could make Afghanistan's new government more of a burden than an asset for Islamabad.

**Why does it matter?** Growing instability and economic hardship could lead impoverished Afghans to seek shelter in Pakistan. Islamabad's alliance with the Taliban could also strain relations with the U.S. and other Western countries. Most importantly, the Taliban's failure to take action against Pakistani militants operating from Afghan territory could endanger Pakistan's internal security.

**What should be done?** So as not to embolden hardliners at home, Islamabad should avoid condoning the Taliban's draconian rule, particularly its treatment of women. At the same time, it should use its ties to nudge the Taliban toward compromises on governance and counter-terrorism commitments that could ease the ostracism the new authorities face.

## *Executive Summary*

Pakistan is trying to make the best of the Afghan conflict's undesirable outcome. Islamabad has backed the Taliban for years, but it would have preferred them to regain political authority in Afghanistan via inclusion in a government with both international legitimacy and outside financial support. Instead, Pakistan's longstanding allies took power by force, sending political opponents into exile and angering Western governments that had kept the Afghan state afloat. The Taliban's government lacks international recognition and the diplomatic and economic benefits that would flow from it. Islamabad will probably not cut its close ties with the new rulers in Kabul. It should use those ties carefully, to nudge the Taliban toward compromises on governance, including on respect for basic rights and adherence to counter-terrorism commitments that might win them greater favour abroad and help ease Afghanistan's humanitarian tragedy.

Having long harboured the Taliban leadership, Pakistan could quickly forge links with the new Taliban authority but has yet to formally recognise this entity. This stance contrasts with Pakistan's position the last time the Taliban held power, in the 1990s, when it was one of only three countries to recognise the group's Islamic Emirate and the last to sever the connection. Islamabad's hesitancy to take the plunge this time around is primarily driven by concern that no other government worldwide, including among Afghanistan's other neighbours, has yet taken the step of recognition. Unilateral action by Pakistan would likely strain relations with powerful Western countries, particularly the U.S. Islamabad also realises that Pakistan's recognition in itself would do little to ease the Taliban's diplomatic and economic isolation.

Yet Pakistan is advocating for the Taliban's cause in other ways on the international stage. In policy pronouncements, in bilateral meetings and at multilateral forums, Islamabad is urging outside powers, particularly the U.S. and its Western allies, to engage with the Taliban, lift economic sanctions, and supply Kabul with both humanitarian and economic assistance. Pakistani policymakers warn – rightly – that continued sanctions and freezes on donor assistance will result in the Afghan economy's complete meltdown, worsening an already grave humanitarian crisis. They also emphasise that the West is more likely to moderate Taliban behaviour through incentives than through punitive measures. Given carrots instead of sticks, they argue, Taliban authorities will be more inclined to opt for inclusive, representative government, to respect basic rights, including of women and girls, and to honour counter-terrorism obligations.

Islamabad is well aware, however, that the Taliban must also assuage international concerns with regard to both governance and security if Western pressure is to let up. While Pakistan is encouraging the Taliban to opt at the very least for a façade of inclusive government and demonstrate at least token respect for basic rights, the Taliban have yet to heed its advice. Nor has Islamabad succeeded in convincing the militant group-turned-government to break links with Afghanistan-based jihadist outfits such as al-Qaeda.

Concerned about such inaction on the Taliban's part, even countries such as Iran, China and Russia that have opted for closer engagement with the Taliban government

are unlikely to officially recognise it any time soon. The odds are even lower that the U.S. and its Western allies will recognise the Taliban government and lift all sanctions so long as the Taliban show no willingness to compromise. Given its closeness to the Taliban, Islamabad could itself face Western pressure, aimed at compelling it to work harder at convincing its Afghan allies to respond more positively to international demands. Cooler relations with the U.S. could become particularly onerous given Washington's weight in international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, on which Pakistan is dependent to prop up its floundering economy.

Islamabad is also concerned about the cross-border implications of Afghanistan's economic and diplomatic crises. Afghanistan's economic collapse is depriving Pakistan of opportunities to revive trade ties that had been badly eroded by frictions with erstwhile Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government. Growing insecurity and economic hardship could translate into thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands, of impoverished Afghans seeking shelter and livelihoods in Pakistan.

Yet Islamabad's leverage appears to have declined after the Taliban takeover in mid-August 2021, while new irritants have already emerged. Pakistan's efforts to secure its border with Afghanistan, to prevent both an influx of refugees and infiltration by Pakistani militants based in Afghanistan, are already a point of contention. The Taliban's apparent refusal to break off relations with their Pakistani counterparts, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, is of even greater concern to Islamabad. The Taliban, in fact, at least initially appeared in some ways to be dictating Pakistan's policy choices – forcing Islamabad to concede to at least some demands on cross-border movement and pressuring it to reach a negotiated settlement with the Pakistani Taliban.

Despite such differences, Pakistan is unlikely to abandon its Afghan allies. Still hopeful that the Taliban takeover will protect Pakistani interests in Afghanistan, Islamabad will likely keep treading lightly, continuing to act as the Taliban's key advocate in the region and beyond, while urging the Taliban to acquiesce in addressing international concerns. In devising policy toward Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, Islamabad should:

- ❑ Continue to call for removal of Western sanctions and resumption of development aid to Afghanistan, while using its close ties with the Taliban to convince them, through quiet diplomacy as well as public messaging, to go further in meeting donors' demands on governance, including respect for basic rights, as well as counter-terrorism commitments. Islamabad should remind the Taliban that their government's stability and domestic legitimacy rests on their ability to govern, which in turn depends on their willingness to compromise on international demands.
- ❑ Resist the temptation to act as the Taliban's main representative at the cost of other equally important relationships, including with the U.S. and European Union member states.
- ❑ Provide as much assistance as Pakistan's resources permit, also keeping humanitarian air and road corridors open, along with land routes, for UN agencies, non-governmental organisations and bilateral donors.

- ❑ End the growing practice of forcibly repatriating newly arriving Afghan refugees, from which Pakistan gains little but risks much harm to the lives and livelihoods of those most in need of shelter.
- ❑ Keep its own security interests in mind in dealing with the Taliban by refraining from endorsing the Taliban's restrictions on women's rights they justify on the grounds of a hardline version of Sharia. Should it appear to condone the Taliban's approach, Islamabad risks emboldening homegrown militants who espouse the same ideology.
- ❑ Be wary of Taliban-dictated negotiations with the Pakistani Taliban, which could adversely affect internal security, particularly in the tribal belt.

Islamabad has difficult choices to make. It is unwilling to distance itself from a friendly government that it sees as a vehicle for asserting influence over its western neighbour. Yet in the Taliban it could find itself saddled with an ally that refuses to do what is needed to ease Western sanctions and end the attendant diplomatic isolation. That Pakistan's clout with the Taliban has declined after the group seized power complicates things further. Still, Islamabad is better placed than any other regional or extra-regional actor to persuade its Afghan ally to accept changed international realities. Islamabad can and should use that special relationship to hammer home the importance of compromise, which is far more likely to stabilise the Afghan state and improve prospects of foreign aid than the Taliban government's current approach.

**Islamabad/Washington/Brussels, 4 February 2022**

# Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan

## I. Introduction

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Following the Taliban takeover in mid-August 2021, Pakistan has urged outside powers to work with Afghanistan's new rulers in the interest of stabilising that conflict-prone country.<sup>1</sup> It has accompanied these calls with pledges of non-partisanship. Yet, given Pakistan's long history of interference in Afghanistan and decades of support for the Taliban, its denials of direct involvement are vastly overstated.

Seeing itself as inheriting the British Indian Empire's western frontier, the so-called Durand Line, in 1947, Pakistan has long perceived Afghanistan as falling within its sphere of influence. Afghanistan's refusal to recognise the 2,430km line as the international border and its claims to contiguous Pakistani Pashtun-majority areas have strained bilateral relations in the past. As an antidote to Pashtun nationalism and to assert its influence over its western neighbour, Pakistan has backed various Afghan Islamist factions, of which the Taliban are the latest incarnation.

In the past, as now, Pakistan has found itself at odds with powerful international players, particularly the U.S., for backing the Taliban. In 1996, after the movement first captured Kabul, Pakistan was one of only three countries, the others being Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to recognise the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. Pakistan had reluctantly severed formal ties with the Emirate after the September 2001 terror attacks in the U.S. Yet, after the October 2001 U.S.-led invasion ousted the Taliban's regime, Pakistan provided shelter to their *rahbari shura*, the body of their top leaders and military commanders. The Taliban's political and military command structures were reconstituted out of Pakistani sanctuaries, allowing the insurgents to recruit, raise money and conduct operations against the U.S. and aligned forces and the Western-backed Afghan government. As the insurgency gained ground in Afghanistan, the U.S. held Pakistan responsible for lending it succour.

Islamabad realised that if the Taliban were to return to power (in a manner that would not cast Pakistan as, once again, protector of a pariah regime), the movement would need international recognition. It set about trying to bring the Taliban into the political mainstream, an effort that would bear fruit when the U.S. opted to exit Afghanistan. Pakistan first facilitated the Obama administration's quiet attempts to open a dialogue with the Taliban. But it was President Donald Trump's decision to hold direct, overt talks with the Taliban that presented Islamabad with its best opportunity to push for the Taliban's inclusion in Afghan governance and security structures.

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<sup>1</sup> For earlier Crisis Group analysis of Pakistan's ties with the Afghan Taliban, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°169, *Pakistan: Shoring up Afghanistan's Peace Process*, 30 June 2021; and Crisis Group Commentary, "With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait", 28 August 2021. See also Crisis Group Asia Report N°266, *Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan*, 28 October 2014.

Pakistan's powerful military saw the Taliban's incorporation into such power-sharing arrangements as serving Islamabad's interests. First, it would protect Pakistan's interests in and influence over Afghanistan. By ending decades of war in Afghanistan, it also might help stabilise Pakistan's conflict-prone north-western border. Plus, Islamabad could ease its strained relations with Washington by brokering talks. Pakistan therefore facilitated U.S.-Taliban negotiations and welcomed the 29 February 2020 U.S.-Taliban deal, which set a firm date for foreign forces' departure from Afghanistan in return for Taliban pledges to cut ties with terrorist groups and to participate in negotiations over a political settlement with other Afghan political forces.

For Islamabad, the deal's value lay in the prospect of a settlement that, by aiding its Taliban ally, would cement Pakistan's influence over Afghanistan. While Pakistan also expected to garner U.S. rewards, the Taliban would benefit from a power-sharing arrangement that was backed, diplomatically and financially, by Washington and its Western allies. In 2021, however, Pakistan grew concerned about prospects for a negotiated peace. In April of that year, the White House decided to unconditionally withdraw U.S. forces by 11 September, the twentieth anniversary of the terror attacks that had led to the U.S. military intervention. Pakistan called instead for a conditional withdrawal, whereby the troops' departure would coincide with progress in the peace talks, but Taliban battlefield gains soon rendered the question moot.<sup>2</sup>

By the time the Biden administration moved up the withdrawal to 31 August 2021, the writing was on the wall. Demoralised Afghan security forces, led by a weak, internally divided government, proved no match for an emboldened insurgency. Quickly capturing much of the country, the Taliban took Kabul on 15 August. The Taliban's conquest has brought Islamabad's principal allies to power in Afghanistan, but their victory creates new diplomatic and security problems for Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

This report looks at Islamabad's response to the Taliban takeover. It focuses on the diplomatic, economic and security challenges the Taliban's victory poses to Pakistan as it forges policy toward Afghanistan today. It also examines the extent to which Pakistani policy initiatives to date have succeeded in addressing the new challenges and threats. It is based on interviews with senior former diplomats, including those with close knowledge of both civilian and military stakeholders, as well as political leaders, financial and security analysts, civil society activists and traders.

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<sup>2</sup> At his weekly news briefing on 13 August, two days before the Taliban captured Kabul, Pakistan's foreign ministry spokesperson reminded his audience that Pakistan had always underscored the importance of an orderly pullout of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops. "We have also emphasized that the withdrawal of foreign forces must coincide with the progress in the peace process". "Pakistan considers U.S. a friend, says FO", *Dawn*, 14 August 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Islamabad-based security analysts, politicians, November-December 2021.

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## II. Backdrop

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In the wake of the Taliban takeover, Pakistan denied the responsibility often attributed to it by the U.S. and Afghans now in political opposition for shaping the Afghanistan conflict's trajectory.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Pakistani policymakers held a host of factors responsible for the Taliban's state capture. These included the Biden administration's hasty, unconditional withdrawal and the lack of support for former President Ashraf Ghani's government inside Afghanistan. As Prime Minister Imran Khan complained, Pakistan is "being held responsible for the shortcomings of the United States" in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan's national security adviser underlined the point, asking: "Did Pakistan tell the Afghan National Army not to fight? Did Pakistan tell Ashraf Ghani to run away?"<sup>6</sup>

Still, when the Taliban seized Kabul, many in Pakistan celebrated their triumph, including Prime Minister Khan, who said Afghans had "broken the shackles of slavery".<sup>7</sup> That initial euphoria was likely based on the perception that the Taliban takeover, which saw Pakistan's chief Afghan ally replace an unfriendly government in Kabul, gave Pakistan an opportunity to consolidate its influence over Afghanistan.

Reality now appears to be sinking in, as reflected by Pakistan's reluctance to unilaterally extend formal recognition to the Taliban's de facto government (see below). Three days after the Taliban takeover, a Pakistani analyst wrote: "Pakistan's destiny is now joined more than ever before with that of Afghanistan, since Pakistan has argued all along that the Taliban are better suited to run Afghanistan than anybody else. 'You got what you wanted', the world will say. 'Now deliver'".<sup>8</sup>

There are rising concerns that the Taliban could fast become more of a burden than an asset as Pakistani policymakers confront a Taliban government that lacks international legitimacy and the attendant economic benefits.<sup>9</sup> The Taliban have captured the state, but their government is sanctioned by the U.S. and its allies. The Taliban inherited a weak economy, hard hit by conflict, political instability, institutional deficiencies and drought. The economy's lifeline has been cut off by the freeze in donor funding, mainly from Europe and the U.S., which under the previous government composed around 75 per cent of Afghanistan's public spending, threatening a humani-

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<sup>4</sup> In a televised interview, Pakistan's National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf said: "We didn't aid or abet anybody". Nonetheless, he added: "We were blamed. We were scapegoated". "Moeed Yusuf: What will a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan mean for Pakistan?", BBC Hard Talk, 9 December 2021.

<sup>5</sup> "U.S. made mistakes in Afghanistan, Pakistan bore the brunt: PM Imran Khan", *The News*, 13 December 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "Pakistan, U.S. should move and work together in Afghanistan: NSA", *Dawn*, 27 August 2021.

<sup>7</sup> "PM Khan talks about overpowering 'shackles of slavery' at Single National Curriculum launch", *Dawn*, 16 August 2021. A cabinet minister and close Khan confidante shared juxtaposed images of Saigon and Kabul's fall. Mosharraf Zaidi, "Pakistan's true role in Afghanistan", *The News*, 17 August 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Khurram Husain, "Taliban's road ahead", *Dawn*, 19 August 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group Commentary, "With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait", op. cit. Just weeks before the Taliban captured Kabul, a Pakistani official involved in Afghan peace efforts said: "We have been telling the Taliban that you may take over Kabul by force, but to seek legitimacy and international recognition the only way to come to power is through peace deals and talks". Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan still 'pushing' Afghan Taliban for peace despite waning influence", *The Express Tribune*, 7 July 2021.

tarian catastrophe.<sup>10</sup> The European Union has suspended \$1.4 billion in development assistance; the U.S. has frozen almost all of the Afghan central bank's \$9.4 billion gross reserves and halted cash shipments to Afghanistan. Multilateral institutions, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), have blocked the Taliban's access to financial resources.

In the face of these punitive measures, the Taliban remain defiant. They resist meeting donors' expectations, which include representative power sharing, respect for fundamental rights, inclusion of women and girls, and follow-through on counter-terrorism obligations. Though there are signs that the Taliban might ease up on restraints on girls' education, the U.S. and also other important powers, including China and Russia, want to see further action against transnational militants before offering any concessions of their own.<sup>11</sup>

Islamabad is concerned about an unstable neighbour on the verge of economic collapse, with potential cross-border implications including new waves of refugees seeking shelter on its territory. It is also troubled both by the Taliban's continued links to Afghanistan-based Pakistani militant groups and the potential impact of Islamist governance in Afghanistan on homegrown sectarian outfits.<sup>12</sup>

Yet Islamabad is reluctant to part ways with the Taliban for several reasons. It still perceives its Afghan allies as the primary means of buttressing Pakistan's standing in Afghanistan. It does not want the Taliban to fall – or face a serious military challenge – because renewed conflict in Afghanistan would also have a cross-border impact. A security expert said Pakistan has “no desire to end its backing for the Taliban. ... Nor can it afford a collapse of the Taliban regime, which, given the fact of neighbourhood, would have dire consequences for Pakistan”.<sup>13</sup> Islamabad's policy thus entails trying to ease the Taliban government's isolation and, to that end, convincing the Taliban to make the necessary concessions to international demands on governance and counter-terrorism, all the while urging them to sever ties with Pakistani militants operating from Afghan soil.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For Crisis Group analysis of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°317, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, 6 December 2021; Crisis Group Commentary, “Thinking Through the Dilemmas of Aid to Afghanistan”, 7 October 2021; and Crisis Group Briefing Note, “Afghanistan's Growing Humanitarian Crisis”, 2 September 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Beyond Emergency Relief*, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Islamabad-based politicians, November 2021. On the eve of the 2021 UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Khan said Pakistan was “extremely concerned” about the threat of terrorism from groups based in Afghanistan, particularly the Pakistani Taliban. He added: “The last thing Pakistan wants is more conflict and turbulence in Afghanistan”. “Pakistan to work with Afghan govt to contain TTP threat: PM”, *The Express Tribune*, 24 September 2021. Two months later, in his keynote address at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's Council of Foreign Ministers' extraordinary session on Afghanistan in Islamabad, Khan said: “We are not in a position to deal with an influx of [Afghan] refugees”. “OIC nations pledge to help unfreeze Afghan assets”, *Newsweek* (Pakistan), 20 December 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interview, Islamabad-based security analyst, November 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Speaking to the media in Washington in September, the Pakistani foreign minister said: “The international community wants to make sure that terrorist groups have no place in Afghanistan. At the same time, the Taliban have also announced that they will not allow Afghan territory to be used against any country. We expect the Taliban to live up to their promises responsibly”. “Taliban heading towards inclusive govt in Afghanistan, says FM Qureshi”, *The News*, 22 September 2021.

### III. Ending the Taliban's Diplomatic Isolation

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Fearing that the Taliban's government would be internationally isolated and deprived of crucial funding, Pakistan launched a diplomatic offensive aimed primarily at the West, particularly the U.S. and EU states.<sup>15</sup> Underscoring Taliban cooperation in facilitating Western evacuation flights of foreign citizens and Western-aligned and at-risk Afghans, Islamabad also emphasised the Taliban's apparent willingness to follow through on international commitments with regard to basic rights and counter-terrorism. Responding to the Taliban's spokesman's first press conference, a Pakistan foreign ministry representative pointed to "positive indications". "We have particularly noted his comments about not letting Afghanistan become a terror haven, protection of lives and properties of Afghans and foreigners, respect for rights of all Afghans, including women, the right to education and political reconciliation".<sup>16</sup>

Pakistan first endeavoured to convince the Taliban to get out from under Western sanctions by reaching an understanding on future governance structures with key Afghan leaders, particularly Hamid Karzai, the first Afghan president after the U.S. invasion, and Abdullah Abdullah, a senior official under the ousted leader Ghani. According to a reporter with access to key policymakers, one such official said: "Let's say for the sake of argument that the Taliban offer important offices to people like Dr Abdullah or Hamid Karzai. ... [It] would have a big impact on how the government would be perceived".<sup>17</sup> Pakistan's military intelligence chief General Faiz Hameed was in Kabul in early September, soon after the Taliban seized power, possibly to deliver such a message.<sup>18</sup> Islamabad hoped that a façade of inclusive government would change international perceptions and prepare the ground for broad acceptance and formal recognition of the Taliban government.

Instead, euphoric about their victory, on 7 September the Taliban announced the formation of a so-called interim government that was composed primarily of key movement leaders. This government's head and several ministers, including of defence and the interior, are on the UN, U.S., EU and other countries' sanctions lists.<sup>19</sup> Opting for Sharia-based governance, the Taliban have suppressed critics and deprived women of job opportunities and universal access to education. With the Taliban also appearing disinclined to break links with transnational jihadist groups, particularly al-Qaeda, the prospects are dim for unfreezing state assets or restoring large-scale non-humanitarian aid and support from international financial institutions.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former ambassador, December 2012. See also Michael Kugelman, "Pakistan pitches Taliban regime to the world", *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2021.

<sup>16</sup> "Pakistan urges early power transfer in Kabul", *The Express Tribune*, 21 August 2021. See also "With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait", op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Fahd Hussain, "Red zone files: Fog of peace in Kabul", *Dawn*, 19 August 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Also see Naveed Siddiqui, "Don't worry, everything will be okay": ISI chief during Kabul visit", *Dawn*, 4 September 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Ibraheem Bahiss and Graeme Smith, "Who Will Run the Taliban Government?", Crisis Group Commentary, 9 September 2021.

<sup>20</sup> A top expert on the Afghan Taliban said: "They've done nothing against any terrorist group. It's a repeat of the past". The expert added: "There is no friction, for example, between the Taliban and al-Qaeda". Crisis Group interview, Lahore, November 2021.

Pakistan's diplomatic offensive now focuses on convincing Western countries that incentives rather than pressure will more effectively change Taliban behaviour. Calling on external actors to draft a roadmap that leads to the Taliban's diplomatic recognition, Islamabad is urging Western countries to recognise Afghanistan's new reality and to adopt more pragmatic policies toward its government. In a press interview, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi insisted that the Taliban would be "incentivised" to meet international expectations, including on inclusive governance, rights and counter-terrorism, if they knew that development and economic assistance would be forthcoming. "At the same time", he said, "the international community has to realise: What's the alternative? What are the options? This is the reality".<sup>21</sup> On another occasion, Qureshi said: "A policy of coercion and intimidation did not work. If it had worked, we wouldn't be in this situation".<sup>22</sup>

There is little ambiguity in Pakistan's backing of the Taliban government. "There is only one way to go. We must strengthen and stabilise the current [Afghan] government", said Prime Minister Khan.<sup>23</sup> While Islamabad has not formally recognised the Taliban government, it has come close. It kept a full diplomatic mission, including an ambassador, in Kabul throughout the fighting that brought the Taliban to power. It issued visas to the Taliban appointees who have replaced veteran diplomats in Kabul's embassy in Islamabad and consulates in Peshawar, Quetta and Karachi.<sup>24</sup> A former Pakistani diplomat with relations with the Taliban has urged Islamabad to go further, by unilaterally recognising the Taliban government. "Islamabad has no rationale for delaying the inevitable. There is no other option". He warned: "Delaying recognition would create many unwarranted suspicions in Kabul".<sup>25</sup>

Islamabad, however, is reluctant to go it alone, fearful of damaging its ties with Western states, particularly the U.S. and Europeans. An expert with deep knowledge of Pakistan's Afghan policy said: "Pakistan is in a very bad place. It wants an early recognition of the Taliban government but no country in or outside the region is on board". The expert added: "Islamabad is particularly aware that such a unilateral move would further strain relations with Washington".<sup>26</sup>

U.S.-Pakistan ties have undoubtedly frayed in the last several years, and in Pakistani perceptions, Islamabad's backing for the Taliban is the main reason why. Pakistani policymakers consider the cooling of relations somewhat unfair. A journalist with access to the uppermost echelons in Islamabad commented:

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<sup>21</sup> Edith M. Lederer, "The AP interview: Don't isolate the Taliban, Pakistan urges", Associated Press, 24 September 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Foreign minister's interview with journalists ahead of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's Council of Foreign Ministers' extraordinary session on Afghanistan, held in Islamabad in December 2021. "People of Afghanistan have suffered for too long, says Saudi FM at OIC summit in Islamabad", *Dawn*, 19 December 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Text of Prime Minister Khan's address to the UN General Assembly, 24 September 2021.

<sup>24</sup> The foreign ministry said issuing the visas did not mean recognition and was "an administrative measure". "Afghan 'diplomats' take charge in Pakistan", *Dawn*, 30 October 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Rustam Shah Mohmand, "Daesh desperate to destabilise Taliban govt", *The Express Tribune*, 12 October 2021. Mohmand is a former ambassador and senior Khyber Pakhtunkhwa bureaucrat.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, November 2021.

Pakistani officials are parroting a fairly reasonable position. We maintain that the Taliban should have inclusive governance, that they should include women and minorities in their government, and that they should ensure that Afghan soil is not used for terrorism against any country. ... And yet the problem persists ... for at least three reasons: 1) Western leaders believe there is a gap between what Pakistani officials say and what they do; 2) Western leaders also maintain that Pakistan has not used the leverage it has over the Taliban sufficiently to change their behaviour; and 3) they also maintain that the Taliban would not have gained the emphatic victory they have without the active support of Pakistan through the years. These Western leaders – especially the Americans – are taking the three factors, welding them into a steel rod and preparing a mighty swing at Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, developments in Afghanistan are the primary factor shaping Pakistan's relationship with the U.S. "There is no other major bilateral context to the relationship", said a former Pakistani ambassador to Washington.<sup>28</sup> President Biden has yet to talk to Prime Minister Khan amid an administration review of Pakistan policy that is stressing Afghanistan. Testifying before Congress, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said this review would not only look at "the role that Pakistan has played in Afghanistan over the last twenty years but also the role we would want it to play in the coming years".<sup>29</sup> Counter-terrorism is paramount, according to a former Pakistani ambassador now based in Washington: "The U.S. would like Pakistan to get the Afghan Taliban's cooperation in weakening entities like the IS-K [Islamic State-Khorasan]. As the Taliban may lack the willingness ... to do this, the Americans also want to have their own operations for which they need air lines of communication from Pakistan".<sup>30</sup>

In the few high-level contacts that have taken place, Washington has asked Islamabad to use its leverage with the Taliban to convince them to commit to inclusive and representative governance, to uphold basic rights, particularly of women and girls, and to take action against Afghanistan-based terrorist groups. During her trip to Islamabad in October, then the highest-level visit by a U.S. official since the Taliban takeover, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met Army Chief of Staff Qamar Javed Bajwa, the foreign minister and the national security adviser. Sherman said they discussed the importance of holding the Taliban accountable to their commitments. "It is in all our interests to have a stable and inclusive Afghanistan that does not serve as a haven for terrorists", she said. It was important, she added, for U.S. and Pakistani officials to consult about "what we should expect of the Taliban" to ensure "that there is no terrorism, here in Pakistan, in Afghanistan, in any country in the region, in the world".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fahd Hussain, "Once upon a Taliban," *Dawn*, 25 September 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, December 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Patricia Zengerle and Humeyra Pamuk, "Blinken says U.S. will assess Pakistan's ties over Afghanistan's future", Reuters, 14 September 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Touqir Hussain, "Mending ties", *Dawn*, 9 November 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Sherman hails 'longstanding ties' with Pakistan", *The Express Tribune*, 9 October 2021. Prior to her visit to Pakistan, Sherman, noting Islamabad's calls for an inclusive government in Kabul, said: "We look to Pakistan to play a critical role in enabling such an outcome". "Ahead of Pakistan visit, top U.S. official demands indiscriminate action against militants", GEO TV, 2 October 2021.

Washington has also reportedly called on Pakistan to provide the necessary support for U.S. counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan, likely focused on preventing an al-Qaeda revival and countering the resurgent Islamic State's local franchise.<sup>32</sup> Though Prime Minister Khan insists that such support is not forthcoming, since he does not want Islamabad to partner with the U.S. military in Afghanistan, Pakistan's foreign office confirmed that the agreement with the U.S. on ground and air lines of communication remains in place.<sup>33</sup>

Even as Islamabad balks at some of Washington's demands, it cannot afford to irk the U.S. too much. The government has dire need of assistance from international financial institutions, particularly the IMF and the World Bank, where the U.S. has considerable weight.<sup>34</sup> When negotiations with the IMF to resume Pakistan's \$6 billion loan program hit a snag, experts attributed the delay at least partly to Washington's refusal to support Islamabad's case.<sup>35</sup> An analyst wrote that U.S. irritation with Pakistan's Afghanistan policy is behind several "ills", one of which is "the pressure on Pakistan regarding the agreement with the IMF".<sup>36</sup> Pakistani policymakers also worry that strained relations with Washington could bring more scrutiny from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an inter-governmental watchdog organisation, which has put Pakistan on its "grey list" for deficits in its counter-terror finance and anti-money laundering regimes.<sup>37</sup>

Parallel to its entreaties with Western governments, Islamabad has embarked on efforts to forge a regional consensus on diplomatic recognition of the Taliban gov-

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<sup>32</sup> On 28 September 2021, in U.S. military leaders' first Congressional testimony after the Taliban takeover, U.S. Central Command chief General Frank McKenzie said: "Over the last twenty years we've been able to use what we call the air boulevard and to go over western Pakistan and that's become something that's vital to us, as well as certain landlines of communication". He added: "We'll be working with the Pakistanis in the future in the days and weeks ahead to look at what that relationship is going to look like in the future". Anwar Iqbal, "U.S. generals express concern over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal in wake of Taliban takeover of Afghanistan", *Dawn*, 29 September 2021.

<sup>33</sup> On 23 October 2021, Pakistan's foreign ministry denied reports, including by CNN, that Pakistan intended to give the U.S. use of Pakistani airspace for U.S. military and intelligence operations in Afghanistan. The ministry, however, added: "Pakistan and the U.S. have longstanding cooperation on regional security and counter-terrorism and the two sides remain engaged in regular consultations". "No 'understanding' in place for use of Pakistani airspace by U.S.", *The Express Tribune*, 23 October 2021. In a media interview, Khan said: "Pakistan suffered 70,000 casualties [through militant attacks], more than any other country by joining the American war [in Afghanistan]. We cannot afford any more military actions from our territory". Naveed Siddiqui, "'No such understanding in place': FO on report claiming U.S. nearing deal to use Pakistan's airspace", *Dawn*, 23 October 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Highlighting Pakistan's economic woes, a financial journalist wrote: "It must seem somewhat ironic to audiences in Washington to see Pakistan sitting on one table asking for resources for Afghanistan, while on another it is trying to negotiate the resumption of an IMF program for itself". Khurram Husain, "Down Taliban road", *Dawn*, 30 September 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, financial experts, December 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Sohail Warraich, "Testing times for Imran?", *The News*, 30 October 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Karachi-based financial expert, December 2021. FATF's "grey list" is composed of jurisdictions under its enhanced monitoring. The organisation placed Pakistan on the grey list in June 2018 and decided to keep it there till January 2022. FATF will undertake its next review of Pakistan's progress in February. An editorial in *Dawn*, a prominent Pakistani newspaper, said it "is not wrong" to conclude that "Western nations have been applying pressure on Pakistan through the FATF/APG [Asia Pacific Group] forum". "A final push", *Dawn*, 23 October 2021.

ernment.<sup>38</sup> Pakistan has helped set up a new forum for foreign minister-level consultations among Afghanistan's neighbours. Along with Pakistan itself, the group includes China, Iran, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. At the forum's meetings, Islamabad has called for a long-term roadmap for political engagement with Kabul.<sup>39</sup> Addressing a virtual summit of the forum in September, Foreign Minister Qureshi emphasised the importance of renewed "diplomatic and international presence in the country".<sup>40</sup>

Pakistan's efforts in the region have also come up short, however. China, Russia and Iran have signalled willingness to broaden engagement with Taliban authorities by keeping their embassies open in Kabul and have extended economic assistance to the Afghan state. But that money is nowhere near enough to fill the massive gaps left by the cutoff of Western funding. Meanwhile, these three countries have been far less generous than Western states with aid to address Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis.<sup>41</sup> All three, moreover, continue to make formal recognition of the Taliban government dependent on more inclusive governance and even more so on action against Islamist militant outfits that threaten their security.<sup>42</sup>

Meeting in November in Islamabad, the special envoys of the Troika Plus, which along with Pakistan and the U.S includes Russia and China, made it clear that recognition is not yet on the cards. The special envoys agreed in their meeting with the visiting Afghan interim foreign minister to continue "practical engagement" with the Taliban government. But the Troika Plus joint communiqué "called on the Taliban to work with fellow Afghans to take steps to form an inclusive and representative government that respects the rights of all Afghans and provides for the equal rights of women and girls to participate in all aspects of Afghan society".<sup>43</sup>

That the world is not likely to stop ostracising the Taliban any time soon was evident in the UN accreditation committee's December decision to defer recognising the Taliban's nominated UN envoy.<sup>44</sup> The UN General Assembly then decided to postpone such recognition in a consensus-based resolution. Islamabad now faces the task of convincing the Taliban leadership to rethink governance and security policies so as to ease their diplomatic isolation. At the same time, the Taliban takeover poses other challenges to Pakistan, particularly to its own national security.

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<sup>38</sup> Just days after the Taliban takeover, Foreign Minister Qureshi told his Chinese counterpart that Pakistan would work to develop "a regional consensus on the evolving situation in Afghanistan", including on recognition. Naveed Siddiqui, "Making efforts to build 'regional consensus' on Afghanistan, Qureshi tells Chinese FM", *Dawn*, 18 August 2021.

<sup>39</sup> The inaugural meeting of the forum was held in Islamabad on 8 September 2021. The second meeting was hosted by Iran on 27 October. The next meeting, to which Islamabad has said the Taliban will be invited, will be held in China at a date to be determined.

<sup>40</sup> The virtual meeting included the foreign ministers of China, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. "Prevention of humanitarian crisis, economic meltdown in Afghanistan key priorities, FM Qureshi tells virtual moot", *Dawn*, 8 September 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Beyond Emergency Relief*, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview, security analyst, Lahore, November 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Troika Plus seeks practical engagement with Taliban", *The Express Tribune*, 11 November 2021.

<sup>44</sup> China and Russia were part of the committee that deferred recognition of the Taliban's designated UN envoy.

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## IV. Opportunities and Constraints

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In international and regional forums and in bilateral meetings with representatives of the U.S. and other key Western states, Pakistani officials continue to insist that the Taliban takeover has not destabilised Afghanistan. Pakistan's UN envoy told the UN Security Council meeting on Afghanistan in November that the nightmare scenarios feared after the Taliban takeover "have not come to pass" as "there has been no widespread violence or violation of human rights" and the "security situation has vastly improved".<sup>45</sup>

Meeting Taliban officials in Kabul and Islamabad, Pakistani officials also continue to advise the Taliban that they need to compromise if they wish to end their diplomatic isolation.<sup>46</sup> As a well-informed Pakistani journalist noted, however, "Pakistan officials continue to complain in private that the Taliban leadership is non-receptive to their urgings. ... So far, the Taliban have not displayed much flexibility". The journalist said Pakistan is "frustrated at this attitude".<sup>47</sup> Though Islamabad remains bent on promoting the Taliban cause, new stresses have begun to bedevil its relations with Kabul's new rulers.

### A. *Early Pains of Partnership*

One source of strain in the Pakistan-Taliban relationship has been the two countries' contested border. Pakistan's fencing of this line has in the past led to periodic clashes between the two militaries. Islamabad's belief that such tensions would dissipate once the Taliban came to power is being tested. Outright confrontation might have ended but border disputes, as reflected in occasional closures, are a growing irritant. Since the Taliban takeover, one side or the other has clamped down on the movement of goods and peoples through the two main crossings – Chaman-Spin Boldak, linking Pakistan's Balochistan and Afghanistan's Kandahar provinces, and Torkham, which connects Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Afghanistan's Nangarhar provinces.

The Chaman-Spin Boldak crossing has been closed twice. In mid-July 2021, with uncertainty looming over the Afghan conflict's outcome, the Pakistani military, which had replaced paramilitary forces along the border, closed the crossing after the Taliban captured it.<sup>48</sup> Pakistan soon reopened it for trade and to allow stranded Pakistani and Afghan citizens to return home. Taliban authorities then closed their side on 5 October, demanding visa-free travel on the basis of national identity documents for

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<sup>45</sup> "Taliban taking halting steps to gain legitimacy, UN says", *Dawn*, 19 November 2021.

<sup>46</sup> In September, Pakistan's foreign minister called on the Taliban to honour obligations, including on counter-terrorism, inclusive governance and human rights. "I don't think anybody is in a rush to recognise them at this stage and the Taliban should keep an eye on that; they have to be more sensitive and receptive to international opinion". "FM Qureshi asks Taliban to be more receptive to international opinion", *Dawn*, 21 September 2021; "No matter what we do, it's never enough: FM", *Dawn*, 23 September 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Fahd Hussain, "Red zone files: OIC comes to town", *Dawn*, 18 December 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Pakistan's interior minister said: "The current volatile situation [in Afghanistan] demands that regular military troops be deployed on the border". "Army troops replace militias at Afghan border", *Dawn*, 24 July 2021.

Afghan citizens.<sup>49</sup> Islamabad was hesitant to acquiesce, concerned that Pakistani militants would exploit the absence of verification to enter Pakistani territory.<sup>50</sup> The crossing reopened on 2 November after almost a month; Pakistani authorities agreed to allow Kandahar's residents to enter Pakistan, while Afghanistan allowed Pakistani residents in Balochistan's Qila Abdullah and Chaman districts to cross the border solely on the basis of national identity documents.<sup>51</sup> The accord was a slightly expanded version of "easement rights" granted to Pashtun tribes whose traditional lands this border cleaves in two.

Pakistan briefly closed the Torkham border crossing as well in mid-July, citing the need to contain the spread of COVID-19. The Taliban also sporadically shut this crossing the following month, reportedly to discourage thousands of Afghans hoping to leave the country.<sup>52</sup> While Torkham is now open, Afghans entering Pakistani territory must have valid visas; such movement is also monitored by Pakistani authorities (see below).

Pakistan's security fence along the border with Afghanistan has also caused quarrels. On 18 December 2021, Taliban soldiers stopped the Pakistani military from erecting segments of fence along Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, with the Afghan defence ministry spokesperson calling the barrier "illegal".<sup>53</sup> According to a senior Pakistani official, Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob moved quickly to defuse tensions, and the parties agreed that further fencing would be done through consensus.<sup>54</sup> On 2 January 2022, after Taliban soldiers tried to remove a section of fence, Pakistan's foreign minister said such differences would soon be resolved "through diplomatic means", a view endorsed by the Taliban foreign ministry spokesman. But in a statement, the Taliban acting information minister said there was no need for border fencing. "The issue of the Durand Line is still an unresolved one, while the

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<sup>49</sup> Mohammad Zafar, "Chaman border closed after Taliban advance", *The Express Tribune*, 14 July 2021; "Afghan trade resumes as Pakistan reopens Chaman border", *Dawn*, 27 July 2021; "Chaman-Spin Boldak border reopens after nearly month-long closure", *Dawn*, 2 November 2021.

<sup>50</sup> As Taliban fighters neared the Chaman-Spin Boldak border crossing, just weeks before withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan, a Pakistani security official said: "Opening of the border could facilitate movement of Pakistanis wanting to support the [Pakistani] Taliban either as fighters or in logistics". "Pakistan may emulate Iran over refugee influx", *Dawn*, 6 July 2021. Briefing parliament on 9 July, Pakistan's national security adviser also warned that Pakistani Taliban militants could enter Pakistani territory in the guise of refugees. "Afghanistan situation volatile, out of Pakistan's control: Moeed Yusuf", *Dawn*, 9 July 2021.

<sup>51</sup> "Chaman-Spin Boldak border reopens after 27 days", *The Express Tribune*, 3 November 2021.

<sup>52</sup> "Torkham border shut to stem COVID spread", *The Express Tribune*, 6 July 2021; "Torkham border remains closed for hours", *Dawn*, 24 September 2021.

<sup>53</sup> "Taliban stop Pakistani troops from fencing border", Reuters, 23 December 2021. A Pakistani opposition politician, asking the foreign minister to brief parliament about the incident, questioned Islamabad's support for the Taliban when they did "not even recognise the border". Nadir Guramani, "Why is Pakistan eager to help Afghan Taliban when they don't even recognise border, questions Rabbani", *Dawn*, 24 December 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Border spat with Taliban resolved: official", *Dawn*, 25 December 2021.

construction of fencing itself creates rifts between a [Pashtun] nation spread across both sides of the border”.<sup>55</sup>

Pakistan strongly believes that the border fence is necessary. A Pakistani military spokesperson said: “The purpose of the fencing is not to divide people but to protect them. This is a fence for peace. ... Work on it will continue, and the fencing is here to stay”. He also claimed that Taliban field commanders were responsible for the “localised problems” on the border, adding: “We have very good relations with the current Afghan government. We understand each other”.<sup>56</sup> Apparently unwilling to annoy their chief backer, the Taliban have begun to take a softer line on the fencing; in January, their envoy in Pakistan said border issues were minor and easily resolvable through talks among locals on both sides.<sup>57</sup>

While for now differences over border management do not threaten the ties between Islamabad and Kabul, they could come to pose a greater problem if the Taliban authorities more seriously challenge the Pakistani military’s fencing efforts and Islamabad’s restrictions on cross-border movement.

The second cause of stress in relations relates to commerce. One reason why Pakistan wanted the Taliban to enjoy international backing when they entered government is that, in that case, bilateral trade could have reached its full potential.<sup>58</sup> Instead, these economic opportunities for Pakistan have become hostage to Western sanctions and the Taliban’s refusal to compromise.

At first, Pakistani businesses saw the Taliban takeover and hence improved relations with Kabul as a chance to boost bilateral trade. Such trade had shrunk from a high of \$2 billion in 2003, when Pakistan was Afghanistan’s largest trading partner, to less than half that amount due to tensions between Islamabad and the Ghani government. “It is time to regain the lost share of the market in Afghanistan”, said a Pakistani business representative.<sup>59</sup> The hoped-for economic dividends have yet to appear.

Challenges to bilateral trade relate to both border crossings and Western policy. Pakistani traders and local communities dependent on cross-border business complain that repeated border closures as well as security restrictions and poor infrastructure hinder commerce.<sup>60</sup> Western sanctions and asset freezes have had an even more serious impact, particularly by starving the Afghan banking system of cash. In mid-September, Pakistani traders said bilateral trade had declined by 50 per cent

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<sup>55</sup> Naveed Siddiqui and Tahir Khan, “Pak-Afghan border fencing issue to be resolved diplomatically: Qureshi”, *Dawn*, 3 January 2022; Tahir Khan, “Pak-Afghan border fencing issue will be addressed through ‘diplomatic channels’: Taliban”, *Dawn*, 4 January 2022.

<sup>56</sup> The spokesperson said the fence, on which construction started in 2017, was 94 per cent complete at the end of December 2021. Kamran Yousaf, “Pak-Afghan border fencing here to stay: DG ISPR”, *The Express Tribune*, 5 January 2022. On 21 January, Pakistan’s interior minister said 2,680km of fencing along the border with Afghanistan had been completed. He added that the remaining stretch, around 21km long, would be completed soon. “2680 km of fencing along Pak-Afghan border completed: Sheikh Rashid”, *The Express Tribune*, 21 January 2022.

<sup>57</sup> “Taliban regime fit for international recognition”, *The Express Tribune*, 13 January 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Pakistan: Shoring Up Afghanistan’s Peace Process*, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> “Experts urge normalised trade with Afghanistan”, *The Express Tribune*, 3 November 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, November 2021.

since their Afghan counterparts could not pay for Pakistani imports in dollars.<sup>61</sup> That month, Pakistan allowed bilateral trade to be carried out in the Pakistani rupee. The decision was also likely motivated by illegal flows of scarce foreign currency to Afghanistan via informal remittance systems (*hundi/hawala*). The president of Pakistan's foreign exchange attributed this unregulated outflow of dollars to the Taliban trying "to leverage whatever options are available in the wake of sanctions"; Pakistan's finance minister also held such outflows partially responsible for the Pakistani currency's devaluation.<sup>62</sup>

While using Pakistani rupees might keep bilateral trade afloat, Pakistani hopes of a major economic dividend after the Taliban takeover will remain unrealised so long as the Afghan economy fails to revive. That in turn will depend on Western sanctions being removed or at the very least eased.<sup>63</sup> For now, Pakistani policymakers are increasingly concerned about the cross-border implications of an Afghan economy crumbling under the weight of sanctions.

### *B. Implications of Afghanistan's Economic Meltdown*

Pakistani policymakers have repeatedly emphasised the need for urgent, unconditional international assistance and economic support to Kabul to avert a major humanitarian catastrophe. Islamabad has asked Western capitals and international financial institutions to remove sanctions on economic assistance to Afghanistan. It has also called upon the U.S. to release the billions of dollars of Afghanistan's financial reserves that it has frozen. Decrying an "unjustified freeze" of Afghan assets, Pakistan's UN envoy told the Security Council: "Cash is needed to revive the economy ... to pay salaries, restore small businesses [and] revive the banking system".<sup>64</sup>

For its part, Pakistan is facilitating the provision of vital assistance by UN agencies to Afghanistan by opening up road and air humanitarian corridors. Islamabad has also committed some \$30 million for food, medicines and other essential supplies.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Some Afghan traders are reportedly paying Pakistani exporters in dollars purchased via informal remittance systems (*hundi/hawala*) in Dubai. Shahid Iqbal, "Alarm over rupee devaluation in Dubai", *Dawn*, 19 December 2021; Manan Aslam and Hammad Ahmad Bhatti, "The future of Pak-Afghan trade", *Dawn*, 25 October 2021; Aziz Buner, "Govt yet to issue order for trade with Afghanistan in rupees", *Pakistan Today*, 25 September 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Afshan Sabohi, "Pakistan having a hard time on economic front as Taliban, world try to outwit each other", *Dawn*, 4 October 2021. See also "Tareen blames speculators for rupee's free fall", *The Express Tribune*, 15 November 2021. *Hundi/hawala* dealers often sell dollars at higher rates than those fixed by the Pakistani government. The efforts of Afghan traders to obtain dollars by these means are thus exerting downward pressure on the Pakistani rupee's value.

<sup>63</sup> Some easing of sanctions is under way to help Afghanistan cope with the humanitarian crisis. Donors agreed in December to transfer \$280 million from the frozen World Bank-administered Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund to the World Food Programme and UNICEF. A U.S. State Department told journalists in Islamabad in December that Washington had helped UN humanitarian agencies disburse around \$152 million in assistance through an Afghan bank. Baqir Sajjad Syed, "U.S. to show flexibility on Afghan financial sanctions: official", *Dawn*, 21 December 2021.

<sup>64</sup> "At UN, Pakistan urges international community to unfreeze Afghan assets", *The Express Tribune*, 18 November 2021.

<sup>65</sup> "Pakistan allows Indian aid transit to Afghanistan", Reuters, 22 November 2021.

Yet with Pakistan's own economy in the doldrums, there are severe limitations to the assistance that it can send.

Pakistani policymakers are apprehensive that the Taliban, hamstrung by inadequate economic resources, will prove incapable of governing effectively and meeting public needs.<sup>66</sup> As Afghan grievances increase, the Taliban's domestic standing could be at stake. Rising alienation in society, Islamabad fears, would undermine the Taliban government's claim to legitimacy, dealing another blow to its chances of international recognition.<sup>67</sup> Islamabad is also concerned that widespread economic deprivation amid a major humanitarian crisis could lead hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees to seek shelter in Pakistan. "Should that happen", a prominent Pashtun politician warned, "and if Pakistan attempts to forcibly stem the flow, it will risk domestic and international outrage".<sup>68</sup>

Islamabad is extremely reluctant to absorb more Afghans fleeing hardship and instability. It has garnered international approval by assisting Western countries in evacuating their citizens as well as thousands of Western-linked and at-risk Afghans. But it insists that Pakistan, already home to around 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees and another 770,000 undocumented Afghan nationals, is in no position to host more.<sup>69</sup> "We have our limitations", said Foreign Minister Qureshi. Pakistan, he went on, "has been hosting over three million, close to four million [Afghan] refugees for so many decades without any international help or assistance. We do not have the capacity to absorb more".<sup>70</sup>

Islamabad has thus restricted the entry of new Afghan refugees. Pakistani policymakers claim that for now there are few signs of a large-scale influx, implying that Afghan citizens are not averse to living under Taliban rule.<sup>71</sup> Yet only Afghans with valid visas are allowed to enter Pakistan, and even then, the state has imposed additional restrictions.<sup>72</sup> According to rights activists in the adjoining provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, Afghan visa holders often require security clearances to enter Pakistan. Officials give such clearances selectively, often denying them to those most in need, such as women's and other rights activists.<sup>73</sup> Desperately seeking livelihoods or fearful of Taliban rule, as in the case of the Shia Hazaras, whom the Taliban

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<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former ambassador with close ties to civil-military policymakers, December 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. A former Pakistani ambassador noted: "Governing a war-ravaged country will be the real test and an imposing challenge. ... Consolidation of power will depend on how well the country is administered". Maleeha Lodhi, "State of uncertainty", *Dawn*, 23 August 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2021.

<sup>69</sup> As the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan drew near, Pakistan's interior minister said: "We have decided not to open our borders for refugees; the aid agencies can help the needy on the other side also". He added: "If the situation deteriorates, we will establish settlements along the border ... prohibiting the entry of refugees into the mainland". "Pakistan may emulate Iran over refugee influx", *Dawn*, 6 July 2021.

<sup>70</sup> "Pakistan's foreign minister says UK must do more to engage Afghan Taliban to avert 'anarchy, chaos'", *The Independent*, 14 September 2021. See also Shahbaz Rana, "Hosting 700k Afghans will cost \$2.2 b for 3 years", *The Express Tribune*, 18 July 2021.

<sup>71</sup> "No influx of refugees via Torkham", *The Express Tribune*, 13 October 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Betsy Jones, "Afghan refugees get cold welcome in Pakistan", *Foreign Policy*, 22 November 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan civil society activists, Lahore, November 2021. See also Tahir Imran Mian, "Getting out of Kabul", *The News*, 23 October 2021.

have persecuted in the past, scores of Afghans have little choice but to rely on people smugglers.<sup>74</sup>

Even as smugglers profit from human misery, Pakistani authorities have reportedly deported hundreds of newly arrived refugees, including women and children. In an important speech before a military audience on 20 August 2021, Pakistan's Army Chief of Staff Bajwa said: "We expect the Taliban to live up to the promises made to the international community of [respecting] women and human rights".<sup>75</sup> Yet despite his words, officials seem to evince little sympathy for Afghans seeking refuge. A politician from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa said: "Hundreds are being forced back, including entire families".<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> "Hazara Shias flee Afghanistan fearing Taliban persecution", *The Guardian*, 29 August 2021.

<sup>75</sup> "Pakistan expects Taliban to fulfil promises on women and human rights: Army chief", *Dawn*, 20 August 2021.

<sup>76</sup> He added: "Pakistan is particularly targeting those that oppose the Afghan Taliban". Crisis Group telephone interview, December 2021. Around 965 newly arrived Afghans in Quetta and 1,486 from Lasbela and Karachi were reportedly deported for illegally entering Pakistan in October 2021. Rights activists say such forced deportations are continuing. Crisis Group interviews, Lahore, November 2021. See also Mohammad Khan Notezai, "Deporting Afghans: a never-ending story of miseries", *Dawn*, 25 October 2021.

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## V. Security Risks and Concerns

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As Islamabad forges policy toward Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, it faces new security challenges, key among which is the cross-border presence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Military operations since the mid-2000s had largely managed to oust the TTP, a coalition of several mainly Pashtun Deobandi militant groups, from Pakistan's tribal belt and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's mainland. Closely aligned ethnically and ideologically with the Afghan Taliban, who are also mainly Pashtun and Deobandi, the Pakistani Taliban leadership and thousands of fighters then relocated to Afghanistan. The TTP subsequently resorted to cross-border attacks that claimed scores of lives of military personnel and civilians.<sup>77</sup>

Islamabad has accused India's intelligence agency and that of the former Afghan government, the National Directorate for Security, of backing Pakistani militants. Pakistan's national security adviser said the TTP, among other "terrorists based in Afghanistan", had collaborated with India and "elements of the Afghan intelligence agencies" to carry out attacks within Pakistan.<sup>78</sup> Pakistani security agencies are, however, well aware that the TTP, which is banned in Pakistan and also on the UN sanctions list, maintains close ties with the Afghan Taliban. In April 2021, a very senior security official said: "They are two faces of the same coin".<sup>79</sup>

Even before the Taliban's August takeover, Pakistan had called on its Afghan allies to deny the TTP cross-border sanctuary. In late June, as the Taliban made rapid military gains, Pakistan's interior minister said Islamabad expects "from [the Afghan] Taliban that they will not allow the TTP and other elements to carry out activity which causes harm to the lives and properties of Pakistani people".<sup>80</sup> According to a well-informed former diplomat, Afghan Taliban leaders repeatedly told Pakistani military officials that they would rein in the Pakistani Taliban, who were fighting alongside them, once their so-called jihad against Western occupying forces and the Western-backed Afghan government was over.<sup>81</sup> But after the Afghan Taliban captured Kabul, TTP cross-border attacks surged.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan*; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Pakistan: Shoring Up Afghanistan's Peace Process*, both op. cit.

<sup>78</sup> Moeed Yusuf, "How Pakistan Sees Afghanistan", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 October 2021. Earlier, on 27 August, the director general of the military's media wing claimed that Afghanistan's National Directorate of Intelligence had helped India's "Research and Intelligence Wing cobble together alliances with Daesh (the so-called Islamic State), TTP and [other] terrorist organisations to hurt Pakistan". "Pakistan side of the border is secure: DG ISPR", *Dawn*, 27 August 2021.

<sup>79</sup> "Enough is enough – Pakistan not happy with Afghan Taliban", *The News*, 28 April 2021.

<sup>80</sup> "Pakistan hopes 'Taliban won't allow TTP to operate in Afghanistan'", *The Express Tribune*, 26 June 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2020.

<sup>82</sup> According to a study conducted by an Islamabad-based think-tank, the rise in militant attacks in Pakistan coincided with the Afghan Taliban's May 2021 offensive. It reached its high point that August when Kabul fell. The study recorded 45 attacks that month. "2021: Pakistan Saw 56% Rise in Militant Attacks", Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, 1 January 2022. See also "Pakistan saw increase in militant attacks following Taliban offensive in Afghanistan: report", *Dawn*, 1 January 2021. After the Taliban takeover, TTP attacks continued, killing scores of security personnel, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province's tribal belt, bordering Afghanistan. "Soldier martyred in North Waziristan terrorist attack", *The Express Tribune*, 4 October 2021; "Three injured in North

Pakistan was particularly concerned by the Taliban's release of scores of TTP commanders and fighters, including former deputy chief Maulvi Faqir Muhammed, during jailbreaks as they advanced across the country. Hundreds more were set free after the Taliban takeover.<sup>83</sup> Reportedly congratulating the Taliban on their victory, TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud renewed allegiance to Taliban Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada.<sup>84</sup> A Pakistani Taliban militant told a Western news agency that TTP fighters "feel more comfortable after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. They can now move around freely in Afghanistan. ... They have no fears of drone attacks. And they can meet and communicate easily".<sup>85</sup> In light of these reports, Islamabad renewed its calls on Taliban authorities to either take action against the Pakistani militants or to expel them from Afghan territory.<sup>86</sup>

Disinclined to cut ties with its Pakistani Deobandi Pashtun allies, the Taliban instead asked Islamabad to reach a negotiated settlement with the TTP.<sup>87</sup> Pakistani officials have since held several rounds of talks with the TTP leadership in Kabul and Khost province in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>88</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban interior minister, and his uncle Khalil, the minister for refugees, have played the lead role in mediating the negotiations.<sup>89</sup> It is the first time that Islamabad has negotiated with a

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Waziristan bomb attack", *The News*, 8 October 2021; "Two FC soldiers, two policemen martyred in Bajaur", *The Express Tribune*, 20 October 2021; and "Eight embrace martyrdom as terrorist attacks rise in KP", *Dawn*, 28 October 2021.

<sup>83</sup> The TTP said around 780 commanders and members had been freed from Afghan prisons and had returned to bases in eastern Afghanistan. A Pakistani news channel claimed that 2,300 TTP militants, including several commanders, were released after the Taliban takeover. "Key TTP leaders released from Afghan prisons", *SAMAA News*, 16 August 2021; "Despite Taliban assurances, world frets again about Afghan militant havens", Reuters, 19 August 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Pakistani Taliban's emir renews allegiance to Afghan Taliban", *Long War Journal*, 19 August 2021.

<sup>85</sup> "Govt bids to quell rise in TTP attacks", Agence France-Presse, 16 November 2021; Kamran Yousaf, "Afghan Taliban given list of 'wanted' TTP men", *The Express Tribune*, 23 August 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Pakistan's information minister said: "Pakistan's top terrorists" from the TTP "are sitting in Afghanistan and we want them". "TTP in disarray after halt to Indian funding for the group: Fawad", *Dawn*, 24 August 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Islamabad-based security analyst, November 2021. Pakistan's information minister admitted that the Afghan Taliban had urged Islamabad to negotiate with the TTP. "Fawad Chaudhry says Afghan govt urged Pakistan to negotiate with TTP", *Dawn*, 9 November 2021.

<sup>88</sup> In an October interview with a Turkish television channel, Prime Minister Khan admitted to the negotiations with the TTP for the first time, saying: "There are different groups which form the TTP and we are in talks with some of the groups". Successful talks, he added, will lead to the government "forgiving them". The TTP leadership said all factions had been consulted before embarking on negotiations. "Govt is engaging with TTP factions for peace, reconciliation: PM", *The Express Tribune*, 1 October 2021; "PM Imran Khan says govt in talks with Pakistani Taliban to lay down weapons", *The News*, 1 October 2021. Earlier in September, Pakistan's president and foreign minister said the government would consider pardoning TTP members if they were to lay down their arms. "Govt could consider amnesty for TTP members who lay down arms", *Dawn*, 11 September 2021; "Govt open to pardon for TTP members if they give up arms, surrender: FM Qureshi", *Dawn*, 15 September 2021.

<sup>89</sup> The Haqqani network, one of the Taliban's most lethal factions, has been an integral part of the group's uppermost ranks since Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada appointed Sirajuddin Haqqani as one of his two deputies in 2017. It occupies prominent positions in the Taliban government today. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Islamabad-based security analysts, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa politi-

banned Pakistani militant group on foreign soil, facilitated by a foreign entity. On 8 November 2021, Islamabad disclosed that it had reached agreement with the TTP on a one-month ceasefire and that negotiations would continue.<sup>90</sup>

Though fully backed by Imran Khan's government and likely conducted by the military, the negotiations have faced domestic pushback. Opposition politicians criticise the lack of transparency, particularly as the government has kept parliament in the dark.<sup>91</sup> They and civil society activists from the north west warn that any settlement would likely resemble earlier short-lived peace deals between the military and TTP factions. Those deals allowed the tribal militants to regroup, only to subsequently start attacking security forces and civilians again.<sup>92</sup> The superior judiciary has also weighed in. A Supreme Court judge asked Prime Minister Khan, appearing before a hearing on the 2014 Peshawar TTP attack that killed over 130 schoolchildren, if the government was "bringing [the TTP] back to the negotiating table instead of taking action against them". He went on: "Are we going to surrender again?"<sup>93</sup>

Fresh fighting soon broke out. Though Islamabad reportedly released more than 90 TTP militants to ensure that negotiations continued, on 9 December 2021 TTP leader Mehsud refused to extend the ceasefire, saying attacks would resume. A TTP statement issued the same day claimed that the government had not honoured the agreement's terms, which included handing over 102 "imprisoned mujahideen" to the TTP through the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.<sup>94</sup> TTP attacks have since gathered pace.<sup>95</sup>

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cians, November–December 2021. See also "Pakistani Taliban demand prisoner releases as condition for talks – sources", Reuters, 6 November 2021; "'Too early' to lay down arms: banned TTP on reported peace talks with govt", *The News*, 5 November 2021; Abdul Sayed and Colin P. Clarke, "With Haqqanis at the helm, the Taliban will grow even more extreme", *Foreign Policy*, 4 November 2021. On the links between the Haqqanis and the Taliban, see Rahimullah Yusufzai, "The Haqqani Question", Jinnah Institute, 2018.

<sup>90</sup> "Govt and TTP have reached complete ceasefire: Fawad Chaudhry", *The News*, 8 November 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Pakistan Peoples Party Chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari said any agreement with the TTP "without the approval of parliament would have no legitimacy". "TTP talks are 'illegitimate' without parliament's approval: Bilawal", *The Express Tribune*, 8 November 2021.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, December 2021. For details of past deals with TTP factions, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°150, *Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas*, 20 August 2018; and Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 242, *Countering Militancy in PATA*, 15 January 2013; 178, *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA*, 21 December 2009; and 125, *Pakistan's Tribal Borderlands: Appeasing the Militants*, 11 December 2006.

<sup>93</sup> Haseeb Bhatti, "APS carnage: SC grills PM Khan on talks with the TTP, questions govt's inaction against perpetrators", *Dawn*, 10 November 2021.

<sup>94</sup> The TTP reportedly asked for the release of at least five senior leaders, including the Swat Taliban spokesman and the late TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud's former deputy. Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Govt releases dozens of low-key prisoners as peace talks continue with TTP", *The News*, 9 December 2021; "TTP declares end to ceasefire", *Dawn*, 10 December 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Sirajuddin, "Second cop on polio duty martyred in as many days in KP's Tank district", *Dawn*, 12 December 2021; "Militants gun down Pakistani soldier near Afghan border", Associated Press, 26 December 2021; "Four soldiers martyred in gun battle with terrorists in North Waziristan", *Dawn*, 31 December 2021; "Police official martyred in Bannu attack", *Dawn*, 2 January 2021; Naveed Siddiqui, "Two soldiers martyred, as many terrorists killed in IBOs in KP: ISPR", *Dawn*, 5 January 2021; "Soldier martyred in Bannu terrorist attack", *The Express Tribune*, 14 January 2022; Munawer Azeem, "Policeman martyred in shootout in capital", *Dawn*, 18 January 2022.

In early January, the Pakistani military spokesman said talks with the TTP were “on hold” as the army renewed its campaign against them.<sup>96</sup>

Even if talks start again, chances of a sustainable deal are slim. For one thing, the government cannot accept many TTP demands. These reportedly include imposition of Sharia in the tribal areas and restoration of the semi-autonomous status those areas enjoyed before the government merged them with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in May 2018.<sup>97</sup> For another, the TTP itself is divided on the question of a truce. At most, TTP factions that fought alongside the Afghan Taliban while eschewing violence in Pakistan would be willing to cooperate. A senior former security official said hardline factions, headed by TTP chief Mehsud, “are unlikely to sign on” and could instead escalate violence in Pakistan.<sup>98</sup> As such, Islamabad’s challenges in combating the TTP will likely grow. In a statement issued a day after the TTP refused to extend their ceasefire, the Afghan Taliban spokesman said: “We request that Pakistan look into their [TTP] demands for the better[ment] of the region and in Pakistan”, indicating the group’s hesitancy to take action against their Pakistani brethren.<sup>99</sup>

Militant forays from bases in Afghanistan are straining Islamabad’s ties with the Taliban just as Pakistani efforts to interdict the TTP threat within Afghanistan have tested Taliban patience with Islamabad. In late December 2021, in a sign of things to come, Pakistan fired a missile at the home of Pakistani Taliban commander Maulvi Faqir Mohammed in Kunar province, just across Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan, wounding two TTP militants.<sup>100</sup>

The recent killing of a TTP commander in Afghanistan illustrates the difficulties for both Pakistan and the Taliban. On 9 January, a senior security official said Islamabad was “telling the Taliban leadership [to] consider the TTP as a test case”. He queried: “If the Taliban can’t address concerns of Pakistan, then who would trust them and their promise of cutting ties to al-Qaeda and other such groups?”<sup>101</sup> A day later, the TTP’s operational commander and spokesman was reportedly shot dead in Nangarhar; a Pakistani security official confirmed the killing the same day and the TTP acknowl-

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<sup>96</sup> He added: “There were some problems ... some conditions that were non-negotiable from our side so there is no ceasefire [right now]”. “Martyrs’ blood went into Pak-Afghan fencing, will continue as planned: DG ISPR”, *Dawn*, 5 January 2021.

<sup>97</sup> For details of the merger, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan’s Tribal Belt*, op. cit.

<sup>98</sup> The former head of the Federal Investigation Agency added: “The TTP’s utility for the Afghan Taliban could grow if Kabul needs the Pakistani militants to fight alongside it against Islamic State-Khorasan”. Crisis Group telephone interview, December 2021.

<sup>99</sup> “Afghan Taliban reject TTP claim of being a ‘branch of IEA’”, *Dawn*, 11 December 2021. The news story contains Mehsud’s undated video.

<sup>100</sup> “Top TTP commander escapes suspected drone attack”, Agence France-Presse, 17 December 2021; “Drone strike on Pakistani Taliban leaders fails to explode, Taliban sources say”, Reuters, 17 December 2021.

<sup>101</sup> “It will be damaging for the Afghan Taliban if they fail to take into account Pakistan’s concerns”, he said. “The global community, particularly the West, will ask, ‘Look, they can’t even satisfy Pakistan, so how would they address terror concerns of other countries?’” “Pakistan asks Afghan Taliban to take TTP as a test case”, *The Express Tribune*, 9 January 2022.

edged it two days later.<sup>102</sup> A former senior military officer said the Taliban authorities had done it: “The Taliban leadership claims that they will not allow anyone to use their territory against others. It was heartening to learn that they lived up to their commitment”.<sup>103</sup> The Taliban, however, denied that the killing had even taken place. A Taliban spokesman said: “I do not confirm these reports. They are not true. No such incident has taken place on this [Afghan] side”.<sup>104</sup>

Regardless of which version is correct, tensions are unlikely to upend the overall relationship. A well-informed former diplomat said such tensions will not be a “make-or-break factor” in the relationship.<sup>105</sup> Islamabad will continue to back the Taliban government, including by helping it fight the local Islamic State franchise. Acknowledging that help, a Taliban spokesman said: “Pakistan is our brother and is supporting us in many ways, including sharing information and intelligence”.<sup>106</sup>

The Islamic State-Khorasan, as the local Islamic State branch is known, is a far lesser concern for Pakistani security agencies than the TTP, but its resurgence in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan could pose new threats. A former senior security official said Pakistan could now become a “good recruiting ground” for the Islamic State, drawing in particular upon the range of homegrown jihadist and Sunni sectarian groups that have lost ground within the country. Members of such groups might either see Afghanistan as an attractive destination – should they come to regard the Taliban as insufficiently committed to imposing Sharia and wish to fight them – or restart violent campaigns in Pakistan. In January, counter-terrorism forces claimed to have killed six Islamic State militants planning attacks in Balochistan’s capital Quetta.<sup>107</sup> In January, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s police chief, attributing the earlier killings of at least three police officers in Peshawar to the Islamic State’s local franchise, said: “I see IS-K as a bigger threat to peace and security in the province compared to the TTP in the near future”.<sup>108</sup>

The Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan has definitely emboldened many homegrown jihadist and Sunni sectarian groups in Pakistan.<sup>109</sup> Pakistan’s religious parties

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<sup>102</sup> “TTP’s ‘most-wanted terrorist’ Muhammad Khorasani killed in Afghanistan: sources”, *Dawn*, 10 January 2022; Tahir Khan, “TTP confirms senior leader Khorasani’s death, calls it huge ‘loss’”, *Dawn*, 13 January 2022.

<sup>103</sup> Talat Masood, “A pragmatic approach toward Afghanistan”, *The Express Tribune*, 12 January 2022. Masood is a retired lieutenant general.

<sup>104</sup> Khan, “TTP confirms senior leader Khorasani’s death, calls it huge ‘loss’”, *op. cit.*

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, December 2021.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Zamir Akram, “Terror surge in Afghanistan”, *The Express Tribune*, 10 November 2021. Akram is a former Pakistani ambassador.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, December 2021. See also Salman Ashraf, “Six Daesh terrorists killed in Quetta”, *The News*, 9 January 2021; Saleem Shahid, “Six Islamic State men killed in Quetta: CTD”, *Dawn*, 10 January 2021.

<sup>108</sup> “KP police chief calls IS-K bigger threat than TTP”, *Dawn*, 21 January 2022.

<sup>109</sup> Briefing parliament in a closed-door session weeks before the Taliban takeover, the Pakistani military intelligence chief warned that a Taliban victory would boost the morale of homegrown militant and jihadist groups, helping them with recruitment and fundraising. “Military leaders back healthy working relationship with U.S.”, *Dawn*, 3 July 2021. A report from an Islamabad-based think-tank concluded that the rise of militancy could be attributed to the Afghan Taliban’s success, which bolstered the morale of Pakistani groups. “Annual Security Report 2021”, Centre for Research

aside, militant Islamists were among the first to welcome the Taliban takeover.<sup>110</sup> In Islamabad, the hardline Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) leadership hoisted the Taliban flag.<sup>111</sup> A top former counter-terrorism official said: “The Taliban victory is a boost for radical Sunni groups in Pakistan. They believe that they, too, like the Taliban, will win their battle for sharia in Pakistan”.<sup>112</sup> On 22 January, Pakistan’s Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid issued a high security alert for law enforcement agencies across the country; the minister warned that smaller sectarian and jihadist groups had become more active in Pakistan “following [the Afghan] Taliban’s success”.<sup>113</sup>

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and Security Studies, 1 January 2022. See also Rashid Khan, “Pakistan suffered 853 violence fatalities in 2021”, *The News*, 2 January 2022.

<sup>110</sup> The Jamaat-e-Islami chief, congratulating the Taliban for having defeated U.S. forces, expressed the hope that the new government would impose Sharia in Afghanistan. Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam’s leader lauded the Taliban’s “restoration of normalcy, peace and policy of reconciliation ... after securing victory”. “Religious parties hail Afghan Taliban’s reconciliation policy”, *Dawn*, 17 August 2021.

<sup>111</sup> “Taliban flags found on rooftop of Jamia Hafza building in Islamabad”, *Dawn*, 21 August 2021.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former head, National Counter Terrorism Authority, December 2001.

<sup>113</sup> “Pakistan on alert after terror attacks”, *The News*, 22 January 2022; “LEAs on alert after new terrorism threat”, *The Express Tribune*, 23 January 2022.

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## VI. Charting a Pragmatic Course

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While Islamabad's support of the Taliban government is understandable as a way to keep its western neighbour stable, Pakistani policymakers should avoid acting as Taliban advocates at the cost of other vital relationships, including with the U.S. and the European Union, important security and economic partners. An analyst cautioned: "By becoming the flagbearer of the Taliban, Pakistan has not endeared itself to many in the international community"; a former foreign minister also expressed concern that "many people in the Pakistan government right now are becoming spokespersons for the Taliban".<sup>114</sup> By taking on that role, a former air chief of staff said, Pakistan risked alienating Washington. Referring to the Taliban victory, he said: "There is no need to boast about what has happened in Afghanistan", adding that diplomacy was not about "picking up enmity with any country. The U.S. is still a superpower. We must realise and respect that".<sup>115</sup>

There are also serious implications for Pakistan's internal security if Islamabad is seen to acquiesce in the Taliban's hardline ideology. Prime Minister Khan has skated close to doing so, for instance in comments about the Taliban's views on women's rights. Claiming that the Taliban bases its restrictions on women's rights on local culture, he said: "The idea of human rights is different in every society. ... We have to be sensitive about human rights and women's rights".<sup>116</sup> Yet the Taliban justifies its restrictions with reference to its version of Sharia. That hardline interpretation has many Pakistani admirers, who might see Khan's remarks as licence to pursue its application in Pakistan. An editorial in *Dawn* stated: "The premier should know better than to co-opt a Taliban viewpoint".<sup>117</sup> An analyst additionally warned: "Pakistan needs to distance itself from the Taliban regime, on two issues. First, their religious interpretation and its political use; and second, the use of force to capture power".<sup>118</sup> Inspired by the Taliban victory, Pakistani Islamists could come to believe that force is the only way to promulgate Sharia at home.

Advising the prime minister against "becoming the Taliban's advocate", a former ambassador said Pakistan should instead:

Support the Taliban and the Afghan people both – the Taliban with the help of China, Russia and any other friends in the region; and the Afghan people with America's help on the issues of women's rights and inclusivity which is important for Afghanistan's stabilisation, and is in Pakistan's own interest. To this end, Pakistan will need to put some distance between itself and the Taliban. This will enhance its leverage with the Taliban as well as its credentials as an honest broker between them and the outside world.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, November 2021. See also Mehr Tarar, "In conversation with Hina Rabbani Khar", *The Express Tribune*, 31 October 2021.

<sup>115</sup> "Ex-air chief sees 'constructive space' despite growing U.S.-India ties", *Dawn*, 26 October 2021.

<sup>116</sup> "Afghanistan will become world's biggest man-made crisis if world doesn't act, says PM Khan at OIC summit", *Dawn*, 19 December 2021.

<sup>117</sup> "PM on education", *Dawn*, 22 December 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Adnan Rafiq, "Victory or calamity?", *The News*, 10 October 2021.

<sup>119</sup> Touqir Hussain, "Unstable neighbor", *Dawn*, 12 October 2021.

Another former ambassador emphasised: “Careful calibration will be needed – assisting Afghanistan, but avoiding overstretch, and acknowledging that the interests of the Taliban and Pakistan are far from identical”.<sup>120</sup>

Islamabad can best serve its Taliban allies by convincing them to respect obligations on governance and security. An expert on the relationship said: “Pakistan should put its full weight on the Taliban to moderate their positions on issues of serious concerns to the West. ... They need to rethink their priorities”.<sup>121</sup> A former foreign secretary concurred. Warning that a “humanitarian catastrophe is about to unfold”, he wrote:

There is an expectation that the Taliban government would honour the commitments it has made and take practical steps in that direction: form an inclusive government, respect human rights especially of women, and not allow Afghan soil to be used by any terrorist entity. If the Taliban government fails to meet the expectations of the regional and international community and adopts an uncompromising approach, the situation is likely to worsen. Conversely, if the Taliban government makes progress in meeting international expectations, the regional and international response could be more forthcoming.<sup>122</sup>

Islamabad should advise the Taliban to address international reservations. Cooperation and compromise would more quickly enable the resumption of foreign financial assistance and hence prevent Afghanistan’s humanitarian and economic crises from worsening. If the Taliban wish to consolidate their regime, they are unlikely to achieve that goal by merely giving in to hardliners in their midst. Pakistan’s influence with the Taliban might have declined and the Taliban certainly appear averse to accepting Islamabad’s advice; yet as the new government’s most reliable external backer, Pakistan still has a role to play. Islamabad should use its close ties to warn the Taliban leadership that the failure to compromise bears high costs – for the lives and livelihoods of Afghan citizens and the stability of the Afghan state. Islamabad should also make clear, through quiet diplomacy and consistent public messaging, that the Taliban’s refusal to break ties with the TTP could strain that important relationship.

Meanwhile, Pakistan could do more itself to ease Afghans’ suffering. Islamabad is quick, with considerable justification, to hold Western sanctions primarily responsible for Afghanistan’s reeling economy and unprecedented humanitarian emergency. Pakistani policymakers also claim that they are doing everything possible within the country’s limited resources to provide life-saving assistance to Afghan citizens. Still, if protecting Afghan civilians in the midst of a major economic and humanitarian crisis is indeed a Pakistani priority, then Islamabad can better demonstrate its commitment. At minimum, it should end the forced deportation of newly arriving Afghan refugees and instead provide shelter to those in desperate need.

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<sup>120</sup> Maleeha Lodhi, “Foreign policy challenges ahead”, *Dawn*, 10 January 2022.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, November 2021.

<sup>122</sup> Aiziz Ahmad Chaudhry, “Mobilising the ummah”, *Dawn*, 20 December 2021.

## **VII. Conclusion**

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Islamabad may view the Taliban as its closest ally in Afghanistan, but the group's seizure of power is far from ideal for Pakistan. Pakistani leaders hoped to bring the Taliban in from the cold as part of an internationally recognised and funded power-sharing arrangement. Instead, the former insurgents' government is starved of aid, lacking formal recognition by a single state worldwide and ruling a country that is about to be consumed by the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

In these circumstances, Pakistan has few good options. Its leaders are right to push the world to give Afghanistan more than humanitarian aid over the coming months and to work with some Taliban ministries to keep basic services alive. But Islamabad should think hard about the relative costs and benefits of unconditionally supporting the Taliban. In the words of one of the country's most seasoned diplomats: "Every country has finite diplomatic and political capital. Can Pakistan afford to spend all that capital on backing the Afghan Taliban?"<sup>123</sup> If Pakistan still chooses to do so, it might find itself being held responsible for Afghanistan's myriad crises. The better option would be to push the Taliban harder toward more inclusive governance and respecting fundamental rights, which would better guarantee stability in Afghanistan itself and make it easier for decision-makers in Western capitals to take steps that would stave off the looming humanitarian catastrophe and save millions of Afghan lives.

**Islamabad/Washington/Brussels, 4 February 2022**

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<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former Pakistani ambassador, December 2021.

## Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. Ero first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director and Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, UN Mission in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**February 2022**

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Chairman and CEO of MOBY Group

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Institute (Senegal); Legal Practitioner  
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Chair of Executive Committee and  
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Former U.S. Deputy National Security  
Adviser on Iraq and Afghanistan

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Managing Partner of ATW Partners;  
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Author and Foreign Policy Journalist,  
Pakistan

**Ghassan Salamé**  
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Special Representative and Head of  
the UN Support Mission in Libya;  
Former Minister of Culture of Lebanon;  
Founding Dean of the Paris School of  
International Affairs, Sciences Po  
University

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Former President of Colombia; Nobel  
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**George Soros**  
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former Prime Minister of Denmark

**Wang Jisi**  
Member, Foreign Policy Advisory  
Committee of the Chinese Foreign  
Ministry; President, Institute of  
International and Strategic Studies,  
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## CORPORATE COUNCILS

A distinguished group of companies who share Crisis Group's vision and values, providing support and sharing expertise to strengthen our efforts in preventing deadly conflict.

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CORPORATE	INDIVIDUAL	
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Shearman & Sterling LLP	David Brown & Erika Franke	Alexander Soros
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Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

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